

**EMPOWERING COUPLES:  
A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO SPIRITUAL CARE**

**Duane R. Bidwell**

**Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013. Soft cover. 144 pp. \$15.00**

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Pastors often report that counseling with troubled couple relationships is the most challenging pastoral care situation they face. Without specialized training, pastors tend to default to focusing on the problems and deficits in a couple relationship and to offer advice and problem-solving ideas. When this approach doesn't work, pastors often have nowhere else to turn. In this book, Duane Bidwell offers an integrated model of pastoral conversation that helps couples focus on developing a covenant friendship, drawing on their strengths and a commitment to shared partnership rather than getting captured by negativity and conflict. Bidwell's goal is to develop a form of "empowering guidance" that "critically integrates spirituality with empirical data about successful marriages to advocate for mutuality and cooperative partnership within covenant relationships." He particularly wants an approach that is effective in working with couples experiencing "the ordinary conflicts and tensions that emerge between partners" (p. 4). My sense is that he successfully meets his goal with this book.

Bidwell spends the first chapter of the book building a theological foundation for healthy covenant relationships based on a theology of mutuality, which serves as a "critical utopia" for evaluating relational possibilities (p. 24). This foundation recurs throughout the text as a touchstone for the kinds of relational health that guide both the counselor and the couple. It also informs the way he uses the three primary resources that most centrally inform his model.

The first of those three resources is desert spirituality. Specifically, Bidwell is interested in the notion of the destructive passions as they were understood in the desert spirituality of the third through sixth centuries C.E. He defines these passions as the intense emotions, habits, cultural beliefs, roles, and so on that "distort our vision and corrode our ability to love" (p. 33). They can be identified, he suggests, by noticing if something is working against the common good of a partnership. Bidwell gives several examples of this – silence in the face of vulnerable sharing by a partner or anger in response to an apology – and concludes that passions always "act to cancel out positive intentions, to dilute or destroy love" (p. 34). The antidotes to destructive passions are the spiritual practices of introspection, confession, and equanimity.

Bidwell moves from this discussion of destructive passions and the

accompanying spiritual practices to a correlation of these with the research of John Gottman. Gottman has conducted long-term research into what helps couples sustain positive relationships over time and what seems to predict unhappiness and dissolution of couple relationships. He developed a framework he calls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse to describe what he believes to be four key destructive elements that can occur in a relationship, often to its extreme detriment. Those four behaviors are Criticism (complaints that take on a global characterization of the partner); Defensiveness (not taking responsibility for one's own behavior and blaming the other instead); Contempt (defining the partner as flawed and defective and, as such, is the most reliable predictor of divorce); and Stonewalling (withdrawing from interaction with the partner). As with the destructive passions, these four couple dynamics (with the possible exception of Contempt) can be countered with certain couple practices that work together to enhance friendship and mutual appreciation.

These two elements of Bidwell's model serve as the context for his proposal for couple empowerment. The heart of his approach is grounded in the third resource, Narrative therapy. He draws in particular from David Nylund's five-step approach to working with children who have been labeled ADHD. Bidwell adapts this five-step narrative model (called the SMART model) for the purpose of working with conflictual couples. Bidwell's five steps capture some key practical aspects of Narrative clinical work including separating the problem story from the couple so that neither member is identified as the problem; mapping the influences of the problem on the couple's life together; attending to and developing exceptions to the problem story and noticing when the partners are more able to be a team; reclaiming and strengthening the couple's partnership story; and helping the couple to expand their new narrative into other aspects of their lives and relationships. After briefly describing this SMART approach, Bidwell describes Narrative theory's key principles and assumptions more fully to serve as a context for his pragmatically oriented model of care. In doing so, he helps to mitigate the danger of turning a complex, philosophically rich theory of the epistemology of problem stories and the multi-storied nature of people's lives into a step by step mechanism for helping conflicted couples. This is a tough balance to find in creating a model for pastoral care.

On the one hand, without the philosophical and theoretical foundations being made evident, the mechanics of the counseling approach may well distort, even pervert, the intended particularity and contextuality of Narrative work. Yet, if the focus is on the postmodern, post-structural philosophy that grounds the paradigm shift that Narrative theory represents, then the accessibility for pastors to the incredibly helpful practices that emerge from Narrative theory may well be lost. Bidwell walks this line as he tries to imply the richness and radical nature of Narrative's philosophical assumptions while making accessible a couple counseling approach that will make an important positive contribution

to pastoral counseling. The most significant thing that is compromised, I think, is the centrality of deconstructing destructive dominant discourses as core to the work of re-authoring positive couple stories. Bidwell alludes to this work throughout the text but doesn't invite it into the key practices.

The last half of the book focuses, chapter by chapter, on the five aspects of the counseling approach. Bidwell does this very effectively, using case studies, verbatim excerpts, suggested counseling questions, and specific problem examples. He also invites the readers to try out some of what they have been reading through suggested exercises.

*Empowering Couples* is wonderfully integrative, with all of the resources engaging and responding to each other. The theological commitments inform all aspects of the model and invite the readers to engage their own perspectives as they explore these ideas and practices. The text is accessible and useable, offering a consistent and effective approach to working with a population that is generally very challenging for parish pastors. I have used this book in two different seminary classes, and it was very helpful for the students in gaining a sense of competency and clarity for their counseling work with couples. I deeply appreciate Bidwell's mastery of these resources and his ability to put them together in a congruent and comprehensive way. It is a significant contribution to our field.

sembly initiated the hymnal project by authorizing research into a new denominational songbook.

For more information or to order the hymnal, visit [bit.ly/preshymnal](http://bit.ly/preshymnal).

—Jerry L. Van Marter

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

70 years ago — April 28, 1943

*“A Prayer for a Broken World. O God of Peace, without Whose spirit there can be no peace, move through our disordered world with healing power, and lead all mankind together toward the things that make for peace. Open the blind eyes of all who seek to enrich themselves by conquest, that they may see a better way of friendliness and mutual trust. Be Thou the strong support of all victims of the greed and cruelty of others. Make plain to all nations the ways in which they can labor together for the world’s health, and the world’s abundant life in the spirit of Him who died to bring life to the whole world, and grant the whole world His peace. Amen.*

— From America’s Prayer Minute”

## BOOKMARK

*Empowering Couples: A Narrative Approach to Spiritual Care* by Duane R. Bidwell. Fortress Press, Minneapolis. 144 pages

It is rare enough for a theologian to combine the insights of renowned marital therapist John Gottman with narrative pastoral theology. It is even more rare to add the insights of the ancient desert fathers and mothers into the mix. This is a wonderfully creative new approach to spiritual work with couples. With the divorce rate in this country over 50 percent and growing, it makes sense for pastors and pastoral counselors to have fresh skills that help couples frame their conflicts and concerns differently. Bidwell provides case examples for his approach. This is a positive book that stands out for the combination of theology, therapy and pastoral depth.

— ROY W. HOWARD  
Outlook book editor